



# Ethical Dilemmas

Society for Latin American Anthropology contributing editors Ramona Pérez and Linda J Seligmann began a series two months ago on the effects of anthropological writing on political processes. The series began with Lynn Stephen's essay on the life of Martin Diskin, noting the poignancy of questions on advocacy and responsibility Diskin raised in his work as a practitioner of the anthropology of human rights. Stephen's essay was followed by a copy of the letter to Congress written by the Guatemala Scholar's Network, wherein they requested support for the Dodd-Lantos bill to declassify US documents relating to Guatemala and Honduras. In the March AN Ethical Dilemmas column, Paul Gelles considered the production of testimonial narratives in general and laid out the complexity of deciding whether or not the content of such narratives was "true." He concluded that it was far more constructive to understand exactly what the production process is and how it comes to constitute a particular genre. The relationship between anthropological writing and political processes addresses not only the political persona of the anthropologist and the silence that too often has surrounded the site and actions of anthropologists in their field research, but also how texts themselves may shape political perceptions, policy and action. As part of this ongoing series, David Stoll, who has done research in the home village of Rigoberta Menchú in Guatemala, offers a counterargument to Gelles's column, challenging anthropologists to distinguish between the truth of testimonial narratives and their mythical power. In this issue's Society for Latin American Anthropology column, Greg Grandin, in turn, discusses the larger political and ethical implications of Stoll's position on testimonial narratives. We welcome your commentaries and responses to the important issues raised in this series.—Linda J Seligmann

## Life Story as Mythopoesis

By David Stoll (Middlebury C)

Mythopoesis is the act of mythmaking, in which people tell certain stories to justify their preferred interpretation of the world. The same myth can mean different things to different constituencies. One example is the difference between how Guatemalans perceive the story of Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, and how her foreign supporters do. Some of my colleagues will be uncomfortable that I discuss Rigoberta's life story and persona in terms of myth. She is, after all, a living person. Whatever is mythic about *I, Rigoberta Menchú* does not prevent it from also being historical. There is no question that a K'iché Maya peasant named Vicente Menchú organized a new settlement called Chimel or that he was persecuted by the Guatemalan army. There is no question that he, wife Juana and son



Rigoberta Menchú. (©1992 Eric T Michelson; courtesy of Verso Publishers)

Petrocinio were killed in the space of 5 months (December 1979-April 1980) or that tens of thousands of peasants were subsequently killed by the Guatemalan army.

### Whose Story Was This?

Two years after Vicente's death, in January 1982, one of his daughters told a story about these events to a Venezuelan anthropologist in Paris, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. According to the 23-year-old Rigoberta, persecution of her family and village came out of a long struggle against ladino (non-indigenous) landlords. Rigoberta herself was now a revolutionary cadre living in exile. It was the Elisabeth who tape-recorded Rigoberta's stories, transcribed and chronologized them, and turned them into the book we know as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Consequently, many readers have wondered whose story this is: Rigoberta's or Elisabeth's? Rigoberta now says that she helped edit her 1982 story, that Elisabeth distorted it and that Elisabeth never paid her the royalties. (According to Elisabeth, they were forwarded through the Mitterand Foundation.) After listening to the first of the 1982 cassette tapes, I believe that Elisabeth was a passive interviewer (she was a student of George Devereux and his ethnopsychiatric approach), that she did a responsible job of editing and that we are reading what Rigoberta said.

If Rigoberta lost half her immediate family to the Guatemalan security forces, how is her story mythical? First, it is a powerful narrative excluding many circumstances that would detract from its appeal. Second, to suggest that Rigoberta's story is not the eyewitness account it purports to be, that other survivors give rather different versions, or that the historical Rigoberta is different from how she has presented herself is to verge on blasphemy. It is to invite

suspicion of having an odious political agenda. To question her story and experience some of the reactions is to experience the rebirth of the sacred in our supposedly post-everything academe.

### Testimony or Testimonio?

But why challenge a young woman's life story? Ordinarily, anthropologists do not dwell on the extent to which a person's own life story is true or not. The very idea sounds journalistic. Is there any compelling reason in this case? Aside from being a life story, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is the most widely hailed example of *testimonio*, the Latin American genre that has brought lives of the poor into scholarship in their own powerful words. Everyone concedes that *testimonio* reflects personal viewpoints. But advocates also regard these stories as "testimony," reliable sources of information and representative voices for entire social classes. "My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans," Rigoberta said, and she was taken seriously enough to win the Nobel prize as a representative of the first peoples of the Americas. Reliability of her 1982 account is therefore a legitimate issue. If her story has been taken as a paradigm for consciousness-raising and liberation but is not reliable in some ways, then its evident appeal should not become an excuse for ignoring different versions of events, especially now that these are being investigated by national truth commissions.

Since 1991 I have spent several months interviewing in Rigoberta's home town of Uspantán. From 1994 to 1996, Barbara Bocek, a Stanford archaeologist who, unlike myself, speaks K'iché Maya, accompanied me. I am indebted to her although what follows is my responsibility alone.

Relatives and neighbors confirm that Rigoberta's family suffered heavily in the violence. Where their recollections differ from Rigoberta's is in the antecedents. According to Rigoberta, her family was so poor that she spent much of her childhood as a plantation peon, not learning Spanish and never going to school. If you ask about her in Uspantán, however, one of the first things you hear is that she was away being educated during the years leading to the violence: to the level of 8th grade in Catholic boarding schools. This was a significant achievement at the time, but it means she could not have been the eyewitness described in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Recollections about Rigoberta's father Vicente also diverge from the book's portrait. According to Rigoberta, Vicente must defend his village's land against ladino bureaucrats and plantation owners. Persecuted by landlords and the state, he has no choice but to go underground and help organize a radical peasant league, the renowned Committee for Campesino Unity. A different picture emerges from relatives, neighbors and the legal docu-

ments filed by Vicente and his adversaries, from the early 1960s to just before his death in 1980. It is true that Vicente was enmeshed in land disputes. It is true that he went to jail twice and was beaten up badly enough to go to the hospital and that his village was evicted on two occasions.

What is not true is that ladino landlords were responsible for these acts. Vicente's unquenchable opponents were instead his own K'iché Maya in-laws, uncles and cousins of Rigoberta's mother. They felt he was using the national land-titling system to steal their land. Vicente's associates also say that during the years before the violence, he was usually at home in his village of Chimele, where he and his three sons worked closely with the Behrhorst Clinic and US Peace Corps.

### For Guatemalans, a Butt of Criticism

If peasants were not defending themselves against landlords, how did political violence start locally? One afternoon in mid-1979, a column of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor appeared in Chimele. Vicente conducted a village meeting, perhaps just to ward off harm, and the guerrillas went away. A few months later, in August 1979, the guerrillas came back, pulled two ladino neighbors out of bed and executed them. These were the first two political killings in the area. Although Vicente had no quarrel with the two dead ladinos, he was blamed because of the aforementioned visit by the guerrillas. While some Uspantanos defend Vicente, others (including some of his closest supporters in the land dispute) blame him for welcoming the guerrillas and then, after the two ladinos were killed, telling his village that they had to support the rebels. Rigoberta is held blameless because she had been taken away by Catholic nuns 3 or 4 years before.

What staggers Uspantanos is that a local schoolgirl could become an international celebrity. I did talk to a few who were scornful of Rigoberta's veracity. But most hear her story through oral transmission, which washes out details to which they might object, leaving a sequence of persecution, survival and denunciation with which many can identify. The same holds for a much wider public. Rigoberta was not known to most fellow Mayas until the left began to publicize her as a Nobel candidate in 1991. But many warmed to the idea that one of their own was being honored internationally, as a symbol for what so many had suffered. Her story also had broad appeal to the many ladinos who have had similar experiences with the Guatemalan state. If poetic truth is good enough for you, this is the part of her story that is all too true.

Paradoxically, while Rigoberta has not faced much incredulity over her story, she herself is the butt of constant

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## Field School Opportunities



*Yearning for a challenge or taste of the exotic and anxious to get your anthropological feet wet, or simply desirous of keeping up your skills? Opportunities to gather expertise in actual research settings abound. Watch this column for ideas on ways to enhance your career and have something to really write home about this summer.*

### Archaeology at Cahokia, June 22-August 14, 1998

The 1998 Northwestern U Archaeological Field School will take place at Cahokia, a large Mississippian-period mound center near present-day East St Louis, IL. This year we will launch the first season of a multiyear project to identify the west and north walls of Cahokia's Central Palisade, with excavations in the southwestern part of "downtown" Cahokia. The palisade was built and rebuilt at least four times during the Stirling and Moorehead phases, based on archaeological information from the east and south walls. The Cahokia Palisade Project will focus on locating the palisade on the west side of the Grand Plaza, clarifying the chronology of construction and abandonment and investigating the increased concerns for defense in the Cahokia chiefdom.

**Training:** Students receive training in site survey and mapping with transit, excavation and recording techniques, artifact identification and preliminary artifact processing in the field laboratory. The field school is kept small in size to ensure individualized instruction and hands-on field experience.

**Credit:** Students typically register for two course credits (Anthropology C21 and C96, Archaeological Field Methods and Advanced Archaeological Field Methods).

**Costs:** Fees for the two-course program are: \$3192 for Northwestern U



Archaeology at Cahokia

degree-seeking undergraduates, and \$2793 for visiting students. The cost of the program includes tuition, housing, supplies and local transportation; some financial aid is available. No previous field experience is required.

**Application:** The field school is limited to 12 students, so early application is recommended. Application deadline is May 1, 1998.

**Contact:** Mary Beth Trubitt, Northwestern U, Dept of Anthropology, 1810 Hinman Ave, Evanston, IL 60208-1310; 847/491-3968; mtrubitt@nwu.edu.

### Archaeology for Women in Illinois, June 1-August 7, 1998

The Center for American Archaeology in Kampsville, IL, offers *Women in Archaeology Internship Program*, June 1-August 7, to give talented women, including high school juniors and seniors, the chance to work with Jodie O'Gorman on research into Middle Woodland life ways in domestic contexts in the Lower Illinois Valley. The team will experience background research, field methodology, archaeology theory and instruction of field-school students.

**Deadline:** Applications are due April 15, 1998.

**Stipend:** Pending funding, the internship provides room and board with a stipend.

**Applications:** Write to Admissions, Ctr for American Archaeology, PO Box 366, Kampsville, IL 62053; 618/653-4232. Women undergraduates and graduate students are also invited to apply.

### Kampsville, IL Adult Field School, May 25-June 19, 1998

The Center for American Archaeology in Kampsville, IL, offers four field school sessions: May 25-29, June 1-5, June 8-12 and June 15-19.

**Activities:** Participants will take part in excavation work, artifact analysis, experimental archaeology, hikes and other activities that focus on the prehistory of the Lower Illinois Valley.

**Cost:** \$300 per session.

**Applications:** Must be received at least two weeks before the start of the desired program. Write to Admissions, Ctr for American Archaeology, PO Box 366, Kampsville, IL 62053; 618/653-4232.

### Paleolithic Cave Art in Spain, June 22-July 22, 1998

The U of Chicago, in conjunction with the Institute of Prehistoric Investigations, is offering a field school in Paleolithic cave art, to be held in northern Spain. It includes the Cave of Altamira. Students will get an overview of the present state of knowledge of Old Stone Age art and the problems of recording and preserving the figures there. Dates for this field school are June 22-July 22. An additional field school will be held in the Middle Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. For a brochure and more information, see the Website at [www2.uchicago.edu/grahamschool/summer](http://www2.uchicago.edu/grahamschool/summer).

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criticism, from almost every quarter, including her own disappointed supporters. The country's Maya movement has long distrusted her as a front for the recently demobilized guerrilla movement. After she finally edged away from the guerrillas in 1994-95, blaming them as the army for the violence, the URNG-aligned "popular organizations" decided that she was a sellout. Most of this goes unpublished, but it is hard not to hear.

One explanation for the disillusionment is that, by presenting herself as a Guatemalan everywoman, she has tried to be all things to all persons in a way that no one could be. As Nobel laureate, she has bestowed her symbolic authority on the building of bridges, between indigenas and ladinos, indigenas in the guerrilla movement and those opposed to it and the political establishment and majority of Guatemalans who are disillusioned with it. The peace process has implicated her in compromises that are bound to offend her supporters and probably not going to convince her old adversaries either. Yet while Rigoberta has become an attractive target as a person, there has been almost no interest in challenging her narrative. I suspect that, even for Guatemalans who know the published version and are aware of its factual problems, the details are unimportant because the atrocities she was trying to dramatize are so unquestionable.

### For Gringos, a Patron Saint

Sometimes it seems that Rigoberta's last supporters are the Europeans and North Americans who first responded to her story and set her on the path to fame. This reflects the outsize role that international opinion has played in the Guatemalan civil war: in the 1980s it helped the guerrilla movement prolong a war that it had lost, and in the 1990s

it pressured the army and guerrillas to end a war they would otherwise have continued. Abroad, it is the published version of Rigoberta's story that prevails, not the oral one. For Guatemalans, the simple thread of persecution, exile and vindication is enough to validate Rigoberta for the purpose intended by the Nobel Committee, as a symbol for all who have suffered.

But for scholars, more has been required of *Rigoberta Menchú*. The reason, I venture, is moral angst. In anthropology and Latin American studies, many have become doubtful about our right to represent the "other," that is, lives of people less privileged than ourselves. For campus deconstructionists worried about implicating themselves in colonialism and racism, *testimonio* and related appeals to the native voice have been a godsend.

By incorporating native voice into the syllabus and deferring to it, we validate our own authority by claiming to abdicate it. This is not necessarily a bad thing; anthropology and Latin American studies are impossible to imagine without it. But in an era of truth commissions, when there is public demand to establish facts, privileging one version of a history of land conflict and homicide will not do. What if, on comparing the most hallowed *testimonio* with other accounts, it is not reliable and not representative in several respects that deserve our attention as scholars? Then we would have to acknowledge that there is no substitute for our capacity to judge competing versions of events, to exercise our authority as scholars. That would unravel a generation of efforts to revalidate ourselves through idealized reimaginings of the other. That is why *Rigoberta Menchú* has been so hard to question.

[David Stoll presented an earlier version of these remarks at "Mything in Action," a panel organized by Joseph Gaughn for the November 1997 AAA annual meeting. His book manuscript about *Rigoberta Menchú* has just been accepted by Westview Press.]

## Notes from Washington

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tributed Intelligence (KDI), for learning and intelligent systems, networking and challenges to computation for the Next Generation Internet; an increase of \$88 million for Life and Earth's Environment, including a 12% increase for the US Global Change Research Program; and an increase of \$107 million for Educating for the Future, a cooperative initiative with the Department of Education focusing on education and training technologies and K-8 mathematics education.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) would be allotted \$136 million in FY 1999, a 23% increase over the FY 1998 level of \$110.7 million. Of that, Research and

Education would receive \$28.4 million, a 25% over the FY 1998 level of 22.8; Preservation and Access would receive \$20 million, a 11% increase; and Public and Enterprise \$16.2 million, a 45% increase. Anthropologist and folklorist NEH chairman William Ferris has proposed the special initiative "Rediscovering America: The Humanities and the Millennium," which would establish regional culture centers around the country to foster public awareness and participation in the humanities. The initiative would receive \$5 million in FY 1999.

What a difference 6 months can make!

*Notes from Washington welcomes input and suggestions from members. Please contact Mary Margaret Overbey, Director of Government Relations, AAA, 4350 N Fairfax Dr, Suite 640, Arlington, VA 22203-1620; 703/528-1902 ext 3006; fax 703/528-3546; poverbey@ameranthassn.org.*